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ABSTRACT

This paper analyzes the 1967 protest by San Jose State College (California) black student athletes against racial discrimination. It claims that the discrimination they experienced was grounded in pervasive racism at that college and eventually had a long term symbolic and concrete effect on black students and higher education. Harry Edwards, a former San Jose State student athlete and then faculty member organized a demonstration the first day of fall semester to protest racial discrimination at San Jose State. He demanded that the administration meet nine demands or the black football players would prevent the opening of the football season by refusing to play. The next day many students and faculty admitted to the media that large-scale racial discrimination occurred at San Jose State. While the campus grappled with the issues in meetings that week, outside groups announced plans to attend the game and disrupt it. The president of the university canceled the game. These events led to public discussion throughout California. The incident can be seen as a prelude to campus activism by African Americans. The next year, Tommie Smith and John Carlos raised clenched fists on the Olympic victory stand to protest racial discrimination in the United States. Both were San Jose State students. (JB)

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RACIAL TURMOIL AT SAN JOSE STATE: THE INCIDENT OF THE 1967 UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT EL PASO VS SAN JOSE STATE FOOTBALL GAME

THEMIS CHRONOPOULOS

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During the Nineteen-Sixties, at the height of the Civil Rights movement and anti-Vietnam War sentiment, many university campuses were in turmoil because of student radicalism. Even effected was San Jose State College, an unlikely troublespot, as it seemed that the silent generation of the Nineteen-Fifties had somehow spilled over well into the Sixties. How could someone consider as a threat the students of a school which was regularly named party school of the year by *Playboy* magazine, the students of a school that had more fraternities and sororities that any other in the nation, the students of a school who partied from Thursday until Tuesday with the day in between used for recovering? Despite all those facts San Jose State became a troublespot, in part because of the activism exhibited by black students, a peculiar phenomenon in itself since there were only seventy-two African American students out of a total enrollment of 24,000. When it comes to student radicalism, San Jose State played as prominent role as did U. C. Berkeley and San Francisco State, even though it never received much national coverage.

Everything started during the spring semester of 1967 when Harry Edwards, then an assistant professor of sociology at San Jose State, realized that the dismal conditions that he faced in 1960 when he joined San Jose State as a freshman still existed:

> In 1960, for example, I was recruited by San Jose State College, a prominent "Tracks school." Fine things were promised. "You'll be accepted here," the head coaches and deans assured me. It developed that of 16 fraternities (as Greek in name as Plato, who revered the democracy of the Olympic Games) not one would pledge Harry Edwards (or anyone of color). The better restaurants were out of bounds and social activity was nil—I was invited nowhere outside "blood" circles. Leaving California, I spent two years acquiring a Master's degree at Cornell University. Returning to San Jose State as a teacher, I knocked on door after door bearing "vacancy" signs, but Mr. Charley was so sorry—the rental room suddenly wasn't available. The end-up:

> a cold cement-floor garage, costing $75 a month. Not long later I came to know Tommie Smith, whose 0:9.5 is the world 220-yard record and whom this same state college uses to impress and procure other speedsters and footballers of his race. "I have you beat," he said. "My wife's pregnant. We have no decent house. So far 13 lovely people have turned me down."[1]

After further discussions with people he knew when he attended San Jose State as an undergraduate, Edwards found that many of the black students were former athletes whose athletic eligibility had expired but who had not graduated yet. These students were not only used and then thrown away, they also were discriminated against by the fraternities and the sororities of the campus, the housing authorities, the athletics department, and just about every other department or organization at San Jose State. By taking advantage of his position as member of the faculty Edwards sought change. His first move was to discuss the problem with the Dean of Students Stanley Benz; but to his dismay Benz displayed indifference toward the problem, since there were so few black students. After that Edwards decided to organize a demonstration which took place on Monday, September 18, 1967, the first day of the fall semester. At the height of the rally, with about 700 people present—including the college's president—Edwards proclaimed that the protesters would do anything to end racial discrimination at San Jose State and to force the administration to meet their demands; they would prevent the opening game of the season from taking place by any means necessary. Naturally, for the party school of the nation the

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[1]Harry Edwards, *The Revolt of the Black Athlete* (New York: The Free Press, 1969), 75-76.

cancellation of the first game would be a grave disaster, since that game would be the excuse for weeks of partying and other similar activities. Moreover, the college would lose a significant amount of game revenues, and the local businesses would be deprived of the money spent for game preparations as well as the river of customers during the day of the game. The situation would not be as significant if the best players were not African Americans; now, something had to be done, since their threat to stop the game was real and not appealing to anybody.

This was one of the first black athlete revolts in the nation and Harry Edwards, who later taught at the University of California, Berkeley and became one of the top sports sociologists in the world, has written widely on the subject. According to Edwards:

> . . . as much as white racist coaches and athletic directors would like to attribute the alleged lack of intellectual incentive among some black athletes to inherent racial failings, such is simply not the case. The fault lies in the "Mickey Mouse" courses into which black athletes are inevitably herded and with the coaching staffs at white schools who not only coach the black athletes, but often counsel them in academic matters. From the perspective of many white coaches and athletic directors, the world does not need black doctors, sociologists, chemists, dentists, mathematicians, computer operators, or biologists. . . . Outline for him a four-year academic program that will qualify him for a B.S. degree (not necessarily designating Bachelor of Science) in basketweaving, car-washing, or gymnasium maintenance. Not many accredited schools offer degrees in such educationally dubious areas, however, and still fewer jobs are available for people possessing such credentials. As a result, proportionately few black athletes graduate from predominantly white schools within the four-year time period covered by their span of collegiate eligibility. In fact, many never graduate at all.[2]

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[2]Ibid., 10-11.

This was exactly the way that the San Jose State black athletes understood their situation, and this is what made them revolt. For them and for Edwards:

> The revolt of the black athlete in America as a phase of the overall black liberation movement is as legitimate as the sit-ins, the freedom rides, or any other manifestation of Afro-American efforts to gain freedom. The goals of the revolt likewise are the same as those of any other legitimate phase of the movement—equality, justice, the regaining of black dignity lost during three hundred years of abject slavery, and the attainment of the basic human and civil rights guaranteed by the United States Constitution and the concept of American democracy.[3]

The black athletes resembled gladiators who, while they entertained the crowd, were not allowed to function in the outside society; and once their usefulness expired, they were just thrown away by society. The few black students who received athletic grants-in-aid were considered to be fortunate. The demands that Edwards and the black students put forth to the campus administration were:

> We the affiliates of United Black Students for Action, hereby put forth the following *DEMAND:*
> 1. Public deliberation of *all* problems and proposed solutions relevant to the situation of minority groups at SJS.
> 2. Publicly announced pledges from the SJS Administration that housing—*approved, unapproved, fraternities,* and *sororities* not open to ALL SJS students will not be open to *any* student. In conjunction with this pledge the following *DEMANDS* are put forth:
> a. That those housing units discriminating are to be *off limits* to all students under 21 years of age—this holds also for fraternities and sororities that refuse to desegregate.
> b. That *any* student *insisting* on living in segregated housing be *suspended* from SJS until such time as he conforms to the moral and ethical codes of this college. And this too refers to sororities and fraternities that refuse to desegregate.
> 3. That the highest authority (local and/or national, whichever is more appropriate) of *any* and *all* social organizations be required to stipulate *in writing* before November 1, 1967, that its particular organizational branch on

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[3]Ibid., 38.

the SJS campus is open to *all* students, and secondly, that *any* and all such organizations *not* conforming to this requisite be dissociated from the college on November 2, 1967.
4. That *any* and *all* organizations providing the above stipulation *prove* by the first day of instruction of the spring semester 1968 that they have ceased all racist discrimination at SJS.
5. That the Dept. of Intercollegiate Athletics organize and put into operation *immediately* an effective program that provides the same treatment and handling for all athletes including visiting prospective athletes.
6. That the Dept. of Intercollegiate Athletics make a public statement denouncing the racist principles upon which the present fraternity system functions and secondly, that they publicly dissociate themselves and their dept. from this system.
7. That the college administration either work to expand the 2% rule to bring underprivileged minority group members to SJS as students at least in proportion to their representation in the general population of California or that the administration utilize this 2% rule *solely* for the recruitment of minority group students.
8. That a permanent commission be set up to administer and operate a "tutorial" type program aimed at the recruitment of minority group members, and secondly, that this commission show *proof* by the deadline admission date for the spring '68 semester that it has worked effectively to make the student minority group population at least proportionate to the representation of the various minority groups in the general population of the State of California.
9. That the administration take steps to insure that student government is representative of the total population of the college and not just an organized, affluent, but corrupt group of racists from 11th Street [Fraternity Row].
Due to the seriousness of the present situation, U.B.S.A. urges all parties empowered to act upon these DEMANDS to do so immediately.

PROFESSOR HARRY EDWARDS
Coordinator United Black Students for Action[4]

The day after the rally, Tuesday, September 19, many students and faculty admitted to the media that large-scale racial discrimination was widely practiced. Fraternity and sorority members in press conferences and meetings admitted that they discriminated against African Americans and asked for time to fix the problem. In an open forum the story of Valerie Dickerson, an African American

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[4]Ibid., 45-46.

coed, was especially moving:

> I never wanted to be put in a position to be humiliated. I rushed a sorority because I was totally unaware any type of discrimination would prevent me from getting into one... These sororities showed friendship toward me but then said—"Sorry but you understand." This was the only excuse I have ever been given.[5]

A member of the Panhellenic Council, an organization representing the twelve sororities of San Jose State, corroborated Dickerson's story that one sorority banned her after one meeting and three others almost pledged her before retracting. Afterwards a representative of fraternity alumni stated: "Yes, we discriminate, I will say very bluntly we do. We discriminate in favor of who want to live with."[6] At the same forum Edwards announced that, unless discriminatory actions in the athletics department and in campus housing including fraternities and sororities were immediately eliminated, the African Americans would disrupt all campus activities starting with the Saturday game against University of Texas at El Paso. He also announced that there would be another meeting at 11pm that Friday in which the African Americans would decide what course of action they would take. During the same day the executive committee of the SJS Academic Council, chaired by the college's president Clark, issued a resolution which supported the demands of the black students.

The fact that San Jose State is part of a larger community and not on its

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[5]Scott Moore, "End Campus Bias, Negro Edict at SJSU," *San Jose Mercury*, 20 September 1967, 2.

[6]Ibid.

own came to play an important role. Different groups in the community decided to get involved in the disagreement during the game and cause turmoil. Callers identifying themselves as "soul brothers" contacted Edwards saying they supported the black athletes' cause and that they would take drastic violent measures at the game. They warned that if the game were played without the black athletes, the entire stadium would go up in flames. Similarly, white racists and bigots threatened that they would appear for the impending showdown; the Hell's Angels decided that they should participate as well and the atmosphere became very tense. Because of fear that something similar to soccer riots in Latin America could take place, on Thursday, September 21, 1967 the president of the university Robert D. Clark announced his decision to cancel the football game between San Jose State and University of Texas at El Paso which was supposed to take place two days later at the Spartan Stadium. The statement of the president was:

> In view of disturbing threats from outside our college community to the peaceful conduct of Saturday night's football game, I have after consultation with the director of athletics, ordered cancellation of the game. I consider the action necessary to protect our students, their parents and friends, from the possibility of violence in Spartan Stadium. I wish to emphasize that this danger is not from San Jose State students. Our own students and faculty have been seeking a resolution of differences through a week-long series of open hearings. The danger comes from the possible involvement of off-campus persons and groups, who by Saturday night, may be unaware of our progress towards a solution. We regret this disappointment to the community and our students. We feel that we don't have the right to take chances with people's lives.[7]

Next to Clark's statement on the front page of *San Jose Mercury*, the largest

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[7]"Clark's Official Statement," *San Jose Mercury*, 21 September 1967, 1.

newspaper of the south Bay Area, one could see the statement of Ronald James, mayor of San Jose:

> With the obvious intervention of outside agitators, Dr. Clark's decision was correct in view of the many citizens that would be in attendance. We do not intend to condone agitation in San Jose and we are grateful for the common sense displayed by the great majority of San Jose State students.[8]

Although most people considered Clark's decision to be the wisest under the circumstances, a few individuals attacked him viciously. State Senator Clark L. Bradley (R-San Jose) called for an attorney general's investigation and accused Clark of giving in to coercion and blackmail.

> I'm mad. I think this goldarned situation at the state college is absolutely unbelievable, and I'm utterly opposed to President Clark's decision in canceling the football game. I am firmly of the opinion that if we give in to this radical element, that we have simply created a "Munich" situation that won't resolve anything and will lead to continued coercion and blackmail.[9]

On the same day Clark placed all the fraternities and sororities at San Jose State on probation because of alleged racial discrimination and created the nation's first ombudsman position in order to reduce racial discrimination practiced by students and faculty. All these actions showed willingness by Clark to meet the protestors' demands; he commented:

> Prejudice, bigotry, discrimination on the basis of race or creed are insidious, subtle, and pervasive. . . . We are not conscious of the shock, or abuse, or subtle hurt that our students and colleagues are subject to in our society and at our own hands.[10]

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[8]"The Mayor's Statement," *San Jose Mercury*, 21 September 1967, 1.

[9]"Bradley Hits Grid Call-Off," *San Jose Mercury*, 22 September 1967, 1.

[10]Scott Moore, "Probation Ordered to All SJS Frats," *San Jose Mercury*, 22 September 1967, 1-2.

At the same time, Clark an Edmund G. Brown appointee was finding himself under great pressure. For one thing the California voters during the previous year had rejected Brown's bid for a third term as governor. His republican opponent Ronald Reagan had defeated him by 3,742,913 to 2,749,174 which was a significant margin. Among the issues that Reagan stressed during the election was the disorder seen in California public university campuses and especially the University of California at Berkeley. He blamed Brown for being unable to reestablish order in the schools, and in one campaign speech he had said that he was "sick at what has happened to Berkeley. Sick at the sit-ins, the teach-ins, the walkouts. When I am elected governor I will organize a throw-out, and Clark Kerr [the University of California president] will head that list."[11] Throughout the campaign of 1966 the media kept on reporting the conflict that was taking place in the campuses and Brown had decided to take a hard line against the agitators. However, he was not as convincing as Reagan in this and many other issues. Once Reagan became governor in his attempts to reduce the state budget he decided to pursue educational cuts combined with tuition hikes to make up the difference. He said that those increases "would help get rid of undesirables. Those there to agitate and not to study might think twice before they pay tuition."[12] At the first meeting of the University of California regents which as

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11James J. Rawls and Walton Bean, *California: An Interpretive History*, 6th ed., (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1993), 434.

12Ibid.

governor Reagan presided, Kerr was dismissed by the regents who were not font of his handling of student unrest since the Sproul Hall sit-in of December 1964. President Clark of San Jose State was finding himself under a similar situation, so it is conceivable that his decision to cancel the game and his effort to help the African-American students and athletes were attempts to avoid further disorder. Of course others like San Jose State's athletic director Robert Bronzan, were upset over the game cancellation. He estimated that the cancellation would cost between $15,000 and $30,000, but he admitted that "if had played the game despite the threat we would have been compared to an airline receiving a bomb warning and taking to the air without checking the plane."[13]

The San Jose State administration seemed to be taking positive steps toward the elimination of discrimination at the campus and a few days later the unrest ended. A delayed reaction most likely for political reasons came by Reagan a few days later. Reagan felt that the cancellation was "yielding to a threat of force," and he displayed his concern over matters in the state's colleges.[14] State Superintendent of Public Instruction Max Rafferty said that "if I had to call out the Marine Corps the game would have been played."[15] Needless to say, Reagan and Rafferty missed the point entirely and tried to present themselves as law and

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[13]"Says Spartan's Bronzan Cancellation Costly to San Jose State," *San Jose Mercury*, 22 September 1967, 57.

[14]Lou Cannon, "Governor Blasts SJS," *San Jose Mercury*, 27 September 1967, 1.

[15]Ibid.

order advocates.

This incident was a prelude to campus activism by African Americans. During the fall of 1968, another game against Bringham Young University was almost canceled. This time Clark, perhaps influenced by the unfavorable comments that he received from his superiors the year before, decided to cancel the athletic scholarships of the football players who refused to play. At the same time, violence over the rehiring of a professor of the African Studies and demands for more funding for the department made San Francisco State close its doors for seven days, and similar episodes happened in the rest of the nation. And during the Olympics that took place during the same year Tommie Smith and John Carlos, both San Jose State African American students, took their famous stance on the victory stand by raising their clenched fists in order to protest racial discrimination in the United States. In fact, that stance which has risen much controversy in America was not an accidental action; it reflected the discrimination that these San Jose State athletes had experienced throughout their college careers, and it came from a tradition of black protest that started with the incident of the football game of San Jose State against the University of Texas at El Paso.

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